

The Feminazi

Feminism and fascism in Leni Riefenstahl's *Das Blaue Licht*

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The Feminazi

"I feel as though I have lived many lives, experienced the heights and depths of each and like the waves of the ocean, never known rest. Throughout the years, I have looked always for the unusual, for the wonderful, for the mysteries at the heart of life." – Leni Riefenstahl

Leni Riefenstahl is an icon with many faces. The German female director and actress is loathed by many and admired by others. She might be called the most influential filmmaker of the Third Reich even though her name is still a taboo in Germany. Many theorists, Bell Hook, Susan Sontag, Catherine Sousslof, Linda Schulte-Sasse and Rebecca Prime, tried to deconstruct her myth by questioning: Leni Riefenstahl, a feminist pioneer or a woman of evil? It is almost like she lived two lives at ones, just like Leni herself said in the quote above about her own life and career. Even her own words can be connected to theories about the fascistic aesthetic, discussed in chapter 2. But a very important aspect to keep in mind is that this subject is much more nuanced than one might think. Theorist, like the ones discussed above, study Leni Riefenstahl as an actress, a director and as a human being and connect her personal life and career to theories about feminism or fascism. Linda Schulte-Sasse wrote a paper concerning the pre-Nazi regime films Leni Riefenstahl directed and featured, *Das Blaue Licht* and *Tiefland*. She wrote,

The two films challenge rigid criteria of taxonomization since neither can be branded a “Nazi” film in a specific chronological sense, nor can they be absolved from such a labelling, because they feature Riefenstahl as director, producer, and actin “star” and because they belong to the suspicious ‘mountain’ film genre that Susan Sontag labels “an anthology of proto-Nazi sentiments” (76).

Schulte-Sasse captures the complexity of studying the work of Leni Riefenstahl. In current society Leni Riefenstahl is often remembered as the female director who produced Nazi propaganda films (United States Holocaust Museum). But even before the production of these propaganda films, this fascist aesthetic is recognized and represented according to Prime, Sontag and Schulte-Sasse in her “non-Nazi” films. The genre of the films, the mountain genre, is an important component when studying the complex role of feminism and fascism in the work of Leni Riefenstahl. The theory concerning the mountain genre, written by Rececca Prima, will be the starting point of this thesis because of its importance in the analysis about the female feministic image but also in the analysis about the fascistic

aesthetic. Her first independently produced film, *Das Blaue Licht*, brought Riefenstahl to the attention of Adolf Hitler (Kamenetsky 228). His approbation may suggest representations of Nazi ideology in the film. This and the fascist aesthetic will be further discussed in chapter two. For this research *Das Blaue Licht* will indeed be analyzed on two elements, fascism and feminism. The two most used words, in the articles from the theorists mentioned above, to describe Leni Riefenstahl. Because Hitler knew Riefenstahl's work well and expressed his admiration towards her, one might expect that her aesthetic bears some similarities to Nazi propaganda (Kamentsky 228). This is the main challenge when analyzing films directed by her, to eliminate prejudgment and start fresh when analyzing the film. Before continuing with the research question, a compact recap of the plot of *Das Blau Licht* will follow. The narrative of the film is about a strange mountain girl, Junta, living in the Alpine above a Tyrolean village. By the villagers she is considered a witch because she is able to climb Mount Cristallo without falling to her death. She has privileged access to a crystal mountain cave which at midnight beams a radiant blue light, fascinating and alluring the men from the village to seek out the source. Numerous young men lost their lives due to this mysterious blue light which emanates with every full moon. A painter from Vianna, Vigo, comes to the area and befriends Junta to eventually fall in love with her even though she does not return his advances. One night Vigo follows Junta to the cave, the source of the light, he draws a map of the grotto filled with crystals. He shows the villagers the map and directs them to the grotto where they mined the crystals. When Junta discovers her grotto is being ravished, she falls to her death. The villagers secure financial prosperity and revere her memory.

For this research, the film *Das Blaue Licht*, produced by and featuring Leni Riefenstahl, will be visually analyzed through two different lenses: feminism and fascism. This thesis will analyze both lenses though an ecocritical perspective. This perspective focusses on the visualization of the environment, nature, in the film and will be used for the visual analysis. To be more precise, how womanhood and the image of nationalism is represented through the visualizations of nature. Before starting the research many connections between nature and feminism and nature and fascism can be established. Starting with nature and feminism, the term used to describe this connection is Ecofeminism, meaning "the way we think about and treat the environment is related to the way we think about and treat women" (47 Roach). There is a clear link between women and "mother nature". For this part of the thesis, theory about the woman-nature relation by Catherine Roach will be used to uncover the implicit meanings behind this metaphor. Also, the theories about ecofeminism discussed in the book *Environmentalism Critical Concept* by David Pepper will be important

for this dissertation. This book discusses the different positions of ecofeminism and how they can be visualized through nature.

Another important aspect, when discussing nature and feminism, but also nature and fascism, is the ‘mountain genre’. The theory about the mountain genre, written by Rebecca Prime, will form the basis for both research questions. This popular Weimar cinema genre is known to lend itself to interpretations that emphasize its relation to Nazi ideology. Important to know, *Das Blaue Licht* was produced and released before the second World War, pre- Nazi regime. This was the film that brought Riefenstahl to Hitler’s attention (Prime 65). Christa Kamentsky wrote; “Considering his perception of the peasant as the ‘cornerstone of the whole nation’, his approbation further suggests the alignment between Riefenstahl’s romantic representation of the villagers and the function of the peasant in Nazi ideology” (228). When studying feminism and the visualization of it through the environment, the mountain genre would not appear to be a fitted theory because of the genre’s masculine character. The Alpine landscape, a characteristic of the mountain genre, provided an effective setting for the recuperation of the German masculinity after World War I. But when Riefenstahl entered the dangerous world of the mountain film, she arose the conflict of gender and made the genre feminine and romantic. She added a plot and a storyline about Junta which affirmed the female superiority towards the mountain, the mountain that caused death to many men. In this paper the visualization of the mountain and its surrounding nature will be discussed and analyzed with the corresponding theory. When studying fascism and the visualization of it through nature, the mountain genre is also important to discuss. According to Prime, what distinguishes *Das Blaue Licht* from other genres or other expedition films of that period is that “while these genres are portraits of ‘elsewhere’ of foreign people in foreign lands, in the mountain, elsewhere is right in Germany. Instead of another country, in the mountain film, elsewhere is the idealized landscape of beauty and purity articulated by German romanticism and made all the more attractive through contrast with modernity” (68). Romanticism and especially the gap between the imaginary and the real is connected with a fascist aesthetic, this will be further explained in chapter two. The romanticism of the mountain and the alpine landscape, in combination with the fairytale-like narrative contributes to the foreshadowing of the fascistic aesthetic.

This paper will make a new contribution to the already existing theories about Leni Riefenstahl and *Das Blaue Licht*. Many papers have been written about Riefenstahl as a feminist pioneer or as a Nazi fascist. For this paper the “or” will be removed and both elements will be equally discussed. Meaning one element will not rule out the other one. The

ecocritical perspective is especially important because it adds new information to the existing studies about Leni Riefenstahl. To make the research more precise and detailed, only the film *Das Blaue Licht* will be discussed and visually analyzed. Leni Riefenstahl produced and acted in the film; she played the role of Junta. When reading already existing papers written about Riefenstahl, a struggle of objectivity is visible. Researchers often only reflect on one aspect of Leni Riefenstahl as a director. This thesis will answer the following main research question; How does the visualization of nature complexify the role of the feministic female image and the fascistic aesthetic in *Das Blaue Licht*? Analyzing the film is much more complex and nuanced, meaning that the answer to the main research question is not one or the other. Both aspects, feminism and fascism, will be equally discussed through the same perspective, namely nature. Using existing theories about the visual characteristics of feminism and fascism and analyzing them through the ecocritical perspective will form a nuanced analysis of *Das Blaue Licht*.

Before being able to answer the main research question, the sub-research questions must be discussed. Starting with the sub-research question concerning feminism; How does the visualization of nature complexify the role of the feministic female image in *Das Blaue Licht*? First the connection between feminism and nature will be explained by discussing the theories mentioned above. These theories, with the mountain genre theory as starting point, will form the research framework to visually analyze *Das Blaue Licht*. The theories will be discussed by using visual examples of *Das Blaue Licht*. These visuals are shots of particular scenes where a feministic or fascistic lens is recognized and discussed. In the second chapter of this paper the other sub-research question will be answered: How does the visualization of nature complexify the role of the fascistic aesthetic in *Das Blaue Licht*? The same research method will be used. First mentioning and expounding the theories about the fascistic aesthetic and secondly connecting the theory to the film by visually analyzing it. The visual examples are still images of particular scenes where the fascistic aesthetic is represented through the visualization of nature. Both analyses of *Das Blaue Licht* will create a solid research, studying both elements equally with the exact same method. For this paper it is important to accentuate that there will not be a one-sided answer to the main research question. Counterpoints are also discussed and will as well be incorporated in the answer, causing the answer to not be one or another but more nuanced. The last chapter will be the conclusion of this paper, answering the main research question. The findings of both analyses of the two sub-research questions will form the answers to the main research question.

Chapter 1: The Feministic Female Image

This chapter will start with analyzing how the feministic female image is visually presented through an ecocritical perspective in *Das Blaue Licht*. Prime's theory about the mountain genre forms the basis for this chapter. The mountain genre was originally seen as a celebration of masculinity. Pure landscapes and strong white men shaped the genre. During this period, film production was almost entirely studio based, this new genre was special because of its commitment to shooting on location in the Alps. This is one of the reasons why mountain films essentially are based around the landscape, at the expense of plot development (Prime 54). According to Prime, the natural landscape played the crucial narrative role in the mountain films (55). Riefenstahl was inspired by the mountain films of Arnold Fanck and made her debut in his film *The Holy Mountain* in 1926. When starring in his film, she created a niche for herself because of its original masculine aesthetic. She became the star in the majority of Fanck's mountain films. The welcoming of Riefenstahl to the mountain genre by itself stands for a new wave of feminism (Prime 57). Her gender in combination with the dangerous world of the mountain genre gave her a lot of admiration from her colleagues. Riefenstahl created an interest in producing a mountain film herself. Prime quoted Riefenstahl, "I began to dream, and my dream turned into images of a young girl who lived in the mountains, a creature of nature. I saw her climbing, saw her in the moonlight" (66). This dream came to life in her film *Das Blaue Licht*, where this creature of nature, Junta, succeeded where men failed and affirmed her superiority by ascending the mountain that caused death to many men from the village (Prime 66). Before starting with the visual analysis, one important conclusion can already be made, Leni Riefenstahl entered a male dominated genre and shaped it into her own feminized version of it (Prime 63). If her version is indeed feminized, will be discussed later in this chapter. Continuing with the visual analysis of *Das Blaue Licht*, multiple important theories will be discussed and used to analyze if a feministic female image is visually represented through nature in the film. Beginning with David Pepper's theory about ecofeminism. He wrote, "the revival of 'earth mother' metaphors, and rejection of what some see as classic 'masculine' ways of perceiving the world open up that territory where environmentalism and feminism draw on each other" (303). Pepper creates a very important link between nature and feminism and uses a map from Val Plumwood to identify and evaluate ecofeminist positions in literature. Plumwood was a philosopher and ecofeminist who contributed new theories about ecofeminism to the existing theories about feminism. Her map is used as an important base to analyze ecofeminism in *Das*

Blaue Licht. One section from this map is particularly important and interesting to discuss, namely the, what she calls, “patriarchy’s assumption of men’s superiority over women”. One scene in particular forms a clear example, images 1.1 till 1.3 visualize the scene and can be found in the appendix. The images show Junta visiting the village carrying her basket with crystals inside of it. On image 1.1 she is entering the room; the setting is an important aspect. First the lighting, the sun seems to follow her and creates almost a path of sunlight for Junta to become more visible. The placement of the tree is also interesting. It almost frames the doorway, indirectly framing Junta. The setting highlights the connection between Junta and nature. Even when she is outside of her comfort zone and surrounded by the villagers, nature seems to go with her and be a part of her. In the next images, image 1.2 and image 1.3, it becomes clear that nature is Junta’s comfort zone. When she is being attacked by one of the men, she immediately runs back to the mountains. She wants to be surrounded by mother earth, in the mountains between the animals. This scene visualizes Pepper’s theory, Junta is a representation of earth as inert. She connects with the animals and the nature around her instead of the humans (males). The active male acts superior over her (female) and wants to own the crystals, earth’s beauty and indirectly her beauty. She feels connected with the crystals and wants to take care of them, just like mother earth is taking care of her.

Important to discuss is the perception of nature as female, when using the terms “Mother Earth” or “Mother Nature” the female is linked to the environment. Roach writes,

The Earth or nature does seem to fit reasonably enough into the metaphor of ‘mother’. After all, it’s from the environment that we draw our oxygen, food, water, and all of the raw materials out of which we fashion the endless items that make up the materiality of our culture. The Earth or the environment is certainly life-giving and life-sustaining, as were and are our mothers (48).

Roach compares the earth (environment) with our mother because of the female ability to give life. This connection between the female and nature is important when analyzing *Das Blaue Licht* because the film portrays Junta as a creature of nature, she is one with nature especially with Mount Cristallo. Nature is kind to her, for example the mountain, only Junta is able to reach the mysterious blue light radiating from the peak of the mountain, while other villagers (especially men) try to climb it but fall to their deaths. Riefenstahl intertwined nature with a human, more important, with a woman. She specifically used a female character, a sensually dressed, attractive woman who is deeply connected with nature. This sensual aspect is another

important section in the discussion of feminism and the link between feminism and nature in the film. Riefenstahl added a sensual quality to the mountain namely an alluring effect on the villagers. When the moon arises at night, the male villagers were forced to go inside by the women of the village, see image 1.4. The men seem to be captivated by the radiating blue light of the mountain and appear to be unable to retain themselves from going towards it. Susan Sontag wrote, “as usual the mountain is represented as both supremely beautiful and dangerous, that majestic force which invited the ultimate affirmation of and escape from the self – into the brotherhood of courage into death” (77). The representation of the mountain as beautiful and dangerous can also be implied to the representation of Junta. She is a beautiful woman scantily dressed, living almost animal like in the mountains. Linda Schulte wrote,

The Blue Light, with its obvious allusion to Novalis's blue flower, represents a general romantic longing, or Sehnsucht linked to woman. This Sehnsucht springs from an awareness of lack, creating a desire that eludes fulfillment and in be “mined,” to borrow Rentschler's term, is destroyed. The film displaces Junta, as object of desire, to the space of representation and thus upholds the gap between the real and the imaginary (130).

Junta and Mount Cristallo are visualized as an object of desire, they are both longed for by men. Her connection with the mountain and its crystals is visually connected by their beauty but the plot of the film strengthens this connection. One scene in particular highlights this connection, when one male villager was unable to retain himself from climbing Mount Cristallo and fell to his death, Junta was seen as guilty. The morning the villagers found the man dead down the mountain, they immediately turned to Junta, see images 1.5 and 1.6. Junta and Mount Cristallo are seen as one by the villagers. The villagers do not see the inner beauty of the mountain and the inner beauty of Junta. Only Junta understands nature, especially Mount Cristallo, in its purest form.

The visualization of the mountain and Junta is very important for the connection between nature and feminism in the film. This analysis will continue on the theory of Catherine Roach and strengthen her train of thought concerning the link between the female and nature. For this part of the discussion the used film techniques will be studied, especially how these particular techniques visualize the link between the female, Junta, and nature, mainly the mountain and the crystals. The use of soft focus is an important visual technique. The images 1. 6 till 1.8 show the use of soft focus when filming Junta, the crystals or the

mountain. Soft focus forms images that are blurred due to spherical aberration, this effect deliberately give the images a blurring appearance while the silhouettes remain their sharp edges. Riefenstahl only uses this technique when filming Junta, the crystals or to enhance the mystery of the mountain. Soft lenses were often only used to soften images of women. Patrick Keating wrote, “A woman’s face would feature ‘gentle’ gradation, while men’s face would express virility with stronger contrast” (102). Keating argues in his article that glamour is seen as a ‘feminine’ trait and glamour lighting is for women. Glamour lighting, including the use of the soft focus, does not follow the “masculine” conventions (Keating 103). The use of soft focus on the shots of the crystals and the mountain contribute to the connection between the feminine and the environment in *Das Blaue Licht*. Riefenstahl chose to link nature with the feministic female image by using this specific technique to accentuate their relation. Image 1.6 shows the glamour lighting and the use of soft focus on Junta. The exact same techniques are used when filming the crystals, image 1.7. These techniques were deployed to enhance beauty and feminize the image according to Keating. There is one perfect shot where all three elements, Junta, Mount Cristallo and the crystals are visualized through this romantic soft focus, see image 1.8. Riefenstahl strongly connected the female image with nature, by using the environment and Junta as the main characters to be powerfully related.

The moon is a returning aspect in the film, it shines its light on the crystals inside of Mount Cristallo, causing them to radiate a blue light. This blue light has an almost hypnotic quality, triggering men to climb the mountain and find the source, the crystals. When the full moon arises, the female villagers force the men to stay inside and close the windows because they are aware of this dangerous obsession the male villagers have with the crystals. Mount Cristallo and the moon have an important connection because without the full moon, the crystals will not radiate the blue light. When analyzing the symbolization of the moon, the full moon is known to symbolize ‘The Mother’ which represents fertility, ripeness, fulfillment and stability. The moon can be seen as a symbol of life and fertility according to Eric Ten Raa, he studied the relationship between the moon and fertility in Sandawe Africa. Ten Raa wrote that the lunar cycle relates to the menstrual cycle of women (25). “The association of the moon with fertility finds its logical extension in the belief that the moon directly influences the sexual properties of human beings (Ten Raa 25). In *Das Blaue Licht*, the moon is a returning factor causing the crystals to light up. According to Linda Schulte-Sasse, Junta understand the signs of nature, which the moon is a part of (130). Schulte-Sasse wrote,

Yet the demonization of Junta is restricted to the point of view of the villagers (i.e., society) and the film's exposition strongly aligns the spectator with Junta as the victim of an internally repressed people constantly shown closing windows to shut out the light of the full moon and thus the danger of eroticism or the dissolution of boundaries (130).

This quote is important because it discusses how the villagers connect Junta to the moon. According to Schulte-Sasse the film displaces Junta as an object of desire and for the villagers, Junta is nothing less than a demonic and destructive Venus whose eroticism threatens their social order (130). Schulte-Sasse connects the blue light, created by the crystals and the full moon, to Novalis's blue flower, which represents a general romantic longing, or "Suhnsucht" linked to women (130). Also, Retschler described Junta as "an erotic presence and a seductive force" (65). Junta and the moon both represent danger through their eroticism, from the point of view of the villagers. The relationship between the female, Junta, and nature, the moon, is seen as dangerous by the villagers but can also be interpreted as power. Prime wrote, "Junta succeeds where men fail, affirming her superiority" (66). The visualization of nature, the moon, plays an important role when analyzing the feministic female image in the film. The use of the moon, which is linked to "The Mother" and her fertility, to represent a majestic and dangerous force, can be seen as a visual contribution to the representation of a female feministic image through nature in *Das Blaue Licht*.

When analyzing the representation of the female feministic image, it is important to question if the female image is indeed a feministic image? Starting with the erotic quality of Junta, "object of desire". The longing for Junta can be seen as female empowerment, because she is able to succeed where other men failed. The eroticizing of Junta can be seen as a way of idealizing her. The villagers see her as a dangerous creature because they do not understand her relationship with nature. This relationship between nature and her enables Junta to climb the mountain, a quality the villagers do not possess. But the eroticizing of Junta can also be seen as a certain power the men (villagers) have over her. The male villagers are looking down on her. In the film, the male is placed above Junta, literally located higher and overlooking Junta. Images 1.9. and 1.10 visualize the scene where Junta enters a room full of villagers, especially male villagers. While she enters the room, all heads turn to her and look at her from a higher level. Giving them the power to gaze over Junta. Image 1.11 shows Junta looking back at them, from a lower level with her head tilted forward. Her body language gives the impression that she is feeling uncomfortable in the room filled with villagers. Junta

is a “creature of nature” and feels at home in nature accompanied by the animals. Just as Pepper wrote, the earth is passive (female) and the seed is active (male), men’s superiority over women is the social construction of passivity as female and animal, and activity as male and human (304). In *Das Blaue Licht*, the male is active, and the female is passive. Although it might appear that Junta is superior because she is able to climb the mountain without failing to her death, the male gaze is strongly visible in the film. The male villagers look down on her, not allowing her to be a part of the village and very important eroticize her. When analyzing the male gaze, it is interesting to keep in mind that Leni Riefenstahl herself produced and directed the film. Bell Hooks and Catherine Soussloff wrote about Leni Riefenstahl that she, as a director, used feminism as a form of performance. Hooks analyzed her memoirs and found out that she positions herself repeatedly as a filmmaker who was permitted to work because the patriarchal state approved of her breaking free of traditional gender roles as part of her civic duty (159). After analyzing her memoirs, he wrote, “the myth of feminine innocence stood Riefenstahl in good stead. Throughout her career, she manipulated a narrative of femininity and innocence to deflect moral and ethical accountability” (Hooks 160). This might say that Riefenstahl was using feminism as a sort of defense. Hooks wrote that she especially manipulated a narrative of femininity and innocence in defending her complicity with the Nazi regime. He explained this statement by using the following example: “no man in Riefenstahl’s position would be believed if he told the world that he used actors from concentration camps but knew nothing about Nazism or its atrocities (Hooks 160). When analyzing feminism in *Das Blaue Licht* it is of course interesting to analyze the representation of the character Junta but also to analyze Leni Riefenstahl as a director and how her creative discissions are influenced by her idea of feminism. Soussloff wrote: “it is Riefenstahl herself who has adopted a sexist ploy – in the specific guise of an innocent but zestful femininity – that depoliticizes her career and elevates, in her own mind, to the rank of naturally irresponsible (34). Riefenstahl herself made the creative decisions concerning the representation of her idea of feminism in *Das Blaue Licht*. But is this representation indeed feministic? This will be further discussed in the conclusion.

Chapter 2: The Fascistic Image

This chapter will discuss the second sub research question; How does the visualization of nature complexify the role of the fascistic aesthetic in *Das Blaue Licht*? An important aspect to first discuss when studying this question is to pinpoint what this fascistic aesthetic is and how it can be visually recognized. According to George Mosse, an American historian focused on Nazi Germany, the fascistic aesthetic was centralized around the ideal beauty, whether that of the human body or of its surroundings (246). This ideal conception of beauty is based on the fascistic view of the German man and woman. Women in Germany were usually shown as exercising in the midst of nature, emphasizing as analogy with natural beauty and innocence (Mosse 250). The ideal human type was clearly set off against what the Nazi's called the 'counter type', this was the exact opposite of the Nazi's normative ideal (Mosse 246). Romanticism and glorification are important for German fascism, not only for the ideal human but also for nature. Pat Brereton wrote, "Adolf Hitler built his twisted ideology on a glorification of 'nature' and 'natural values' (36). According to Brereton he even promoted the German nationalist (mythic) wish to return to a pre-industrial nature, the *heimat* (36). The *heimat* literally means homeland, home, native region (Preface Blickle). Peter Blickle wrote multiple representation of the *heimat*; Alpine meadows; a rushing brook and a field in flower; the mill and its millwheel – sometimes with a beautiful wife standing by (Preface). When connecting these characteristics to *Das Blaue Licht*, a lot of them are represented in the film. Image 2.1 is a shot of the Alpine meadows; it visualizes the classic image of the Alps. Image 2.2 shows a rushing waterfall, streaming from the top of Mount Cristallo. The waterfall is not a rushing brook, but it does visualize nature's natural way of transporting water. The film does not visualize a millwheel, but it does incorporate a beautiful woman, Junta, standing in the alpine landscape, image 2.3. The wish to return to a pre-industrial nature might also be represented in the film according to Prime. She wrote, "*The Blue Light* can be read as a critique of the pillaging of nature in the hands of modernity" (Prime 66). This is visualized through the destroying of the cave by the villagers, who are eager to sell the crystals for a profit while Junta is the "creature of nature" protecting it from being destroyed. In the film, the grotto is eventually mined, and one might conclude that modernity "won". The film could be interpreted as a wish to return to a pre-industrial nature, *heimat*, which remains its beauty and purity. Again, the mountain genre is an important aspect when analyzing the *heimat*. The genre allows the *heimat* to be fully represented. Prime wrote, "in the mountain film, elsewhere is the idealized landscape of beauty and purity articulated by

German romanticism and made all the more attractive through contrast with modernity (68). In the mountain genre, “elsewhere” is right here in Germany. The *heimat* is visualized as a romanticized and glorified Alpine landscape in *Das Blaue Licht*. Fighting against modernity and protecting its nature.

The visualization of nature in the film might represent an image of the *heimat*, but it does not directly imply that this image contributes to the fascistic aesthetic. Peter Blickle wrote a book about the *heimat*. He introduces his book with a compact explanation and definition of the *heimat*, which I find interesting when analyzing the connection between the *heimat* and the fascistic aesthetic. He wrote, “in recent years German scholars have been interested in *heimat* mainly as one aspect of a *völkisch*, localized nationalism that eventually became an important element of National Socialism (Blickle x). The term *heimat* is difficult to define because of its different associations and meanings in different languages. Blickle wrote,

The word *heimat* to a nonnative speaker often has a peculiar and slippery quality. “Paradise” is not the same as “home” or “homestead” – not usually. But this interesting multiplicity of meanings is in no way unsettling to German speakers. Just the opposite, it seems. The idea of *heimat* is everywhere (4).

In the German language, *heimat* is almost a neutral term (Blickle 3). For German culture *heimat* will continue to play a significant role in the longing for a specific sheltering space, whether it receives the name *heimat* or not (Blickle 6). For the “other” the term *heimat* can be defined or interpreted negatively and strongly connected to Nationalistic and even fascistic sentiments. Blickle wrote that in the idea of *heimat* we (the “other”) find what one could call rudiments of German tribalism that have, historically, proved formative for nationalistic and, often, racist sentiments (6). This could mean that we (the “other”) look at *heimat* as one of the foundations of Nationalism, which gives the term a negative connotation. When questioning if the image of the *heimat* contributes to the fascistic aesthetic, it is simplistic to say yes or no. Although it could play an interesting role in the analyses of nature in *Das Blaue Licht*. This will be included in the conclusion of this thesis.

The alps are an important aspect for of course the mountain genre but also for representation of fascism in *Das Blaue Licht*. Brereton wrote that Hitler promoted the wish to return to a pre-industrial nature, the *heimat* (36). Rebecca Prima also writes extensively about the alps in her mountain genre paper. One sentence in particular is important; “during the

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Alps were culturally constructed as antiurban, antimodern space, fulfilling the ‘quintessentially’ desire for the ahistorical (Prime 58). The alps could be seen as the ultimate *heimat* and might define why the alpine setting is connected to Nazi Germany. Siegfried Kracauer wrote a case study about Weimar cinema and characterized the mountain genre as “an exclusive German genre...rooted in a mentality kindred to the Nazi spirit”. The alps are the ideal setting for filming the mountain films and are also used as setting for *Das Blaue Licht*, creating a possible connection between the alps and the representation of the fascist aesthetic. Brereton discussed the romanticism and glorification of nature as an aesthetic seedbed for the evolution of Nazism (36). This romanticizing and glorifying of nature can be connected to the way in which Mount Cristallo is visualized in *Das Blaue Licht*. Prime wrote that Riefenstahl recasted the mountain film in the narrative mode of a fairy tale, complete with a “crystal mountain, magical stones, and an outcast heroine” (63). This fairytale like visualization of the mountain can also be seen through the soft-focus lens, which is also being used in the film with shots of Junta. Image 2.4 shows a shot from a blurred Mount Cristallo. The crystals inside of Mount Cristallo alone are fairytale like objects. Riefenstahl as a director, chose to also add the soft-focus lens when filming the crystals, enhancing the romanticism of the mountain and indirectly glorifying nature. Perfectionating the beauty of the alps, nature and of course the mountain. By idealizing nature in the film, Riefenstahl could be aspiring to create an ideal *heimat*.

Prime also wrote about the “outcast heroine”, heroism is another characteristic of the mountain genre and is connected to the fascistic aesthetic according to Prime (56). In her paper about the mountain genre, she wrote, “the content of the films conforms to popular conceptions of Nazism: the white, athletic characters can be seen to represent the ideal Aryan “super race”, while the narrative emphasis on heroism, self-sacrifice, and submission to the force (nature, for instance) seems tailor made to educate ideal fascist subjects” (Prime 56). This ‘heroism’ comes from the actual heroism while shooting a mountain film. When shooting a film in the mountains, actors faced extreme circumstances. Usually, they worked in a studio instead of outside in the Alps. Nature eventually is the determining factor and the leading force when filming a mountain film. This heroism, self-sacrifice and submission to nature is a main characteristic for the mountain genre. It creates the opportunity to show the ideal human: white, athletic, beautiful. Especially Junta, according to Mosse the ideal woman in Germany, was usually shown as exercising in the midst of nature, emphasizing as analogy with natural beauty and innocence (250). Junta is often placed on top of the bumpy rocks, in the middle of nature, able to climb the mountain without falling in contrast to the villagers,

image 2.3. She does not appear to wear much make-up, which corresponds to the subscription Riefenstahl as a director gave to Junta; “a creature of nature”.

When analyzing the fairytale like visualization of the alps another important subject related to fascism must be discussed, “anti-realism”. The term anti-realism refers to the gap between the real and the imaginary. Linda Schulte-Sasse wrote about *Das Blaue Licht* that the film flirts with the possibility of transgressing the institutional boundary between the imaginary and the real, which she claims to be constitutive of a fascist aesthetic (130). In other words, according to Schulte-Sasse, this “gap” between the real and imaginary was a fundamental element for the fascistic aesthetic. Romanticizing is an important aspect, Schulte-Sasse wrote that the romantic motifs in the film are seen as characteristics of the imaginary (129). According to Susan Sontag, the romanticizing can be seen through the visualization of Mount Cristallo. She wrote, “As usual the mountain is represented as both supremely beautiful and dangerous, that majestic force which invited the ultimate affirmation of an escape from the self” (Sontag 77). The romanization of the mountain can be seen through the possession of its majestic force and its ability to hypnotize the villagers to climb it. This romanticism can be interpreted as avoiding the “real” world. Riefenstahl herself wrote, “whatever is purely realistic, slice-of-life, which is average, quotidian doesn’t interest me” (Schulte-Sasse 130). Riefenstahl’s goal was not to project a realistic image, but to visualize a romanticized “imaginary” world. Eric Rentschler agrees with this hypothesis and applies it to *Das Blaue Licht*. He wrote that Junta had her own intuitive feelings about nature and was destroyed by her naïve disregard of the real world around her, the world she set out to avoid (Rentschler 49). The avoiding of the real results in the, mentioned above, “gap” between the real and imaginary. This boundary between the real and imaginary is first claimed to be a constitutive of a fascistic aesthetic according to Schulte-Sasse. But then, she also discusses counterpoints about why this film with its imaginary quality does not necessarily has to qualify as fascist. She even asks the following question, “do various contemporary (non-Nazi) phenomena that live off the same tension between reality and imaginary and likewise attempt to transgress the boundary between the imaginary and the “real” then qualify as fascist? (Schulte-Sasse 124). This question will be further discussed in the conclusion of the thesis.

Conclusion

One of the goals of this thesis is to eliminate the “or” when analyzing Leni Riefenstahl, who is described as feminist pioneer or as a Nazi fascist. Starting with analyzing how the visualization of nature complexifies the role of the feministic female image. Is the female image even feministic represented in the film? For this sub-research question Pepper’s theory about the male and female will be used. This theory is a very important base for this final analysis and is as followed:

In patriarchy the imagery is of earth as inert and passive (female) and the seed as active and male. Central to patriarchy’s assumption of men’s superiority over women is the social construction of passivity/materiality as female and animal, and activity/spirituality as male and distinctly human (304).

The earth is inert, passive and more important female and animal according to Pepper. This link between the earth, its animals and the female is present in *Das Blaue Licht*. Clear examples of this link have been discussed in chapter one. For instance, the connection between Mount Cristallo and Junta. She was the only one who could climb it and not fall to her death. Rebecca Prime wrote extensively about Junta and the mountain. One quote in particular is important; “Junta succeeded where men fail, affirming her superiority by ascending the mountain that caused the death of many men” (66). This quote appears to support the hypothesis of the feministic female image, but I want to dig deeper. How feministic is the connection between the mountain and the female character, Junta? Her connection with nature can actually confirm Pepper’s theory, she is connected with earth and is seen as passive while men are connected with the seed and seen as active. The superiority men have over women, according to Pepper, is the social construction of passivity as female and animal, and activity as male and human. The passivity of the female is not a characteristic of feminism and even represents masculinity. Meaning that what first seemed to be a feministic link between nature (the mountain) and the female (Junta) might actually be one of the most defining characteristics of a masculine film. The mountain genre formed the basis of this thesis and still is important for the conclusion. This genre was originally seen as a celebration of masculinity because of the pure landscapes and the strong white men who shaped the genre. In *Das Blaue Licht*, a female character is the protagonist, which is an interesting twist and change for the genre. But the use of a female protagonist does again not

immediately mean that the film is feministic. The male villagers are still visualized as active and the female (Junta) as passive. Even though Prime wrote about Junta being superior, the villagers still look down on her. The male is literally placed higher than Junta, gazing over her. This male gaze is also one of the defining characteristics of a masculine image.

Continuing with the second sub research question, how does the visualization of nature complexify the role of the fascistic aesthetic in *Das Blaue Licht*? First the fascistic aesthetic was defined; the aesthetic is centralized around the ideal beauty, whether that of the human body or of its surrounding (Mosse 246). After analyzing the film according to the definition of the fascistic aesthetic, the film could be interpreted as a wish to return to a pre-industrial nature, which remains its beauty and purity. This idealized place can be linked to the *heimat*. By perfecting the beauty of the Alps, nature and of course the mountain in the film, Riefenstahl could be aspiring to create an ideal *heimat*. But although the visualization of nature in the film might represent an image of the *heimat*, it does not directly imply that this image contributes to the fascistic aesthetic. The romanticizing of nature in the film can be a characteristic of the aesthetic but does not necessarily qualify as fascist. Schulte-Sasse wrote an important analysis of the film which perfectly discusses the complexity of this subject.

Although *The Blue Light* shares thematic and stylistic traits with many Nazi films (and different artistic forms), it lacks structural elements characteristic of a fascist discourse. While the same can be said of many films produced during the Third Reich, others have at least moments in which the boundaries between the aesthetic and the real begin to dissolve. (Schulte-Sasse 129).

Even though the film has an overlap in thematic and stylistic traits, it does not define the film as “fascist”. *Das Blaue Licht* occupies the gray zone between films whose content, production and distribution history can be seen as “Nazi propaganda” or clearly dissociated from National Socialism because they feature Leni Riefenstahl as director, producer, and actress according to Schulte-Sasse (76). The film cannot be branded as a “Nazi” film nor can it be absolved from such a labeling. This together with the visualization of nature complexifies the role the fascistic aesthetic has in *Das Blaue Licht*.

When answering the main research question, I must say that the complexity of this question impressed me. The visualizations of the female image in *Das Blaue Licht* I first thought of as feministic were later argued to be not feministic at all. The visualization of nature does connect with the role of the female but does not represent a feministic image in

Das Blaue Licht. When analyzing how the visualization of nature complexifies the role of the fascistic aesthetic, it can be said that the visualization of nature does share some visual characteristics which can be linked to the fascist aesthetic. But *Das Blaue Licht* also lacks important characteristics which makes it difficult to connect the visualization of nature to the fascist aesthetic resulting in a two-sided answer. Nature does play an important role in the visualization of the *heimat*, which could be seen as a visualization of the fascist aesthetic, but the visualization nature also lacks fundamental characteristics which define the fascist aesthetic.

Appendix



Image 1.1



Image 1.2



Image 1.3



Image 1.4



Image 1.5



Image 1.6

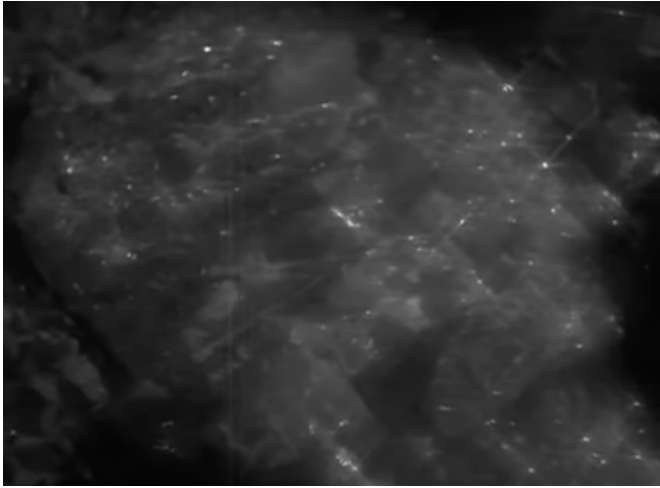


Image 1.7



Image 1.8



Image 1.9



Image 1.10



Image 1.11



Image 2. 1



Image 2. 2



Image 2. 3



Image 2. 4



Image 2.5

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